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ABSTRACT

According to the definition that a rural school district is one in which 75% or more of the population lives outside Standard Metropolitan Areas or in which student density is equal to or less than 10 pupils per square miles, 36 or 65% of West Virginia's 55 counties are classified as rural. State school policies do not specifically recognize the differences between urban and rural school districts. Although a few policies imply consideration for the rural nature of most of the state's school districts, none of the provisions have been funded. Since 1982, the state has been making an effort to promote a thorough and efficient system of free schools as mandated by Pauley vs. Bailey, a pioneering case and a catalyst for reform. Also known as the Recht decision, the ruling prescribed the precise subjects to be taught, the number of minutes of instruction, and curriculum goals. Typically, students in rural counties begin the school day with a long bus ride, have unemployed parents who dropped out of school, receive special education services, score lower on achievement tests and have a greater chance of dropping out of school. School revenues are raised from property taxes; this presents a problem in rural counties with no commercial or business properties. When school districts are ranked by quartiles based on student density, the least dense quartile is shown to have the lowest average personal income: approximately five-eighths of the average personal income of the most dense quartile of districts. Findings of a 1988 Task Force indicated serious problems existing in the structure and finance of the educational system and offered possible solutions. This document contains statistical data and 12 references. (ALL)

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The Condition of Rural Education in West Virginia: A Profile

Pam Coe and Craig B. Howley

September 1989

Produced by
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INTRODUCTION

This profile of West Virginia rural schools addresses itself to the following questions:

- What proportion of school systems in the state is rural?
- In what ways do rural schools differ from urban and suburban schools?
- Does the State Department of Education treat rural schools differently from urban/suburban schools? What accommodation is made for the differences between urban and rural schools?
- How does student achievement in rural schools compare with that in urban/suburban schools? What factors appear to correlate with achievement in rural schools?

We address these questions in five major sections on state policies, environments in which rural schools operate, characteristics of rural students, characteristics of rural schools, and service delivery systems for school improvement. Wherever appropriate, recent developments at the state level which clearly affect rural education are emphasized. Various quantitative data were supplied by the West Virginia Department of Education and pertain to the 1985-1986 school year. Other data sources appear in the reference list.

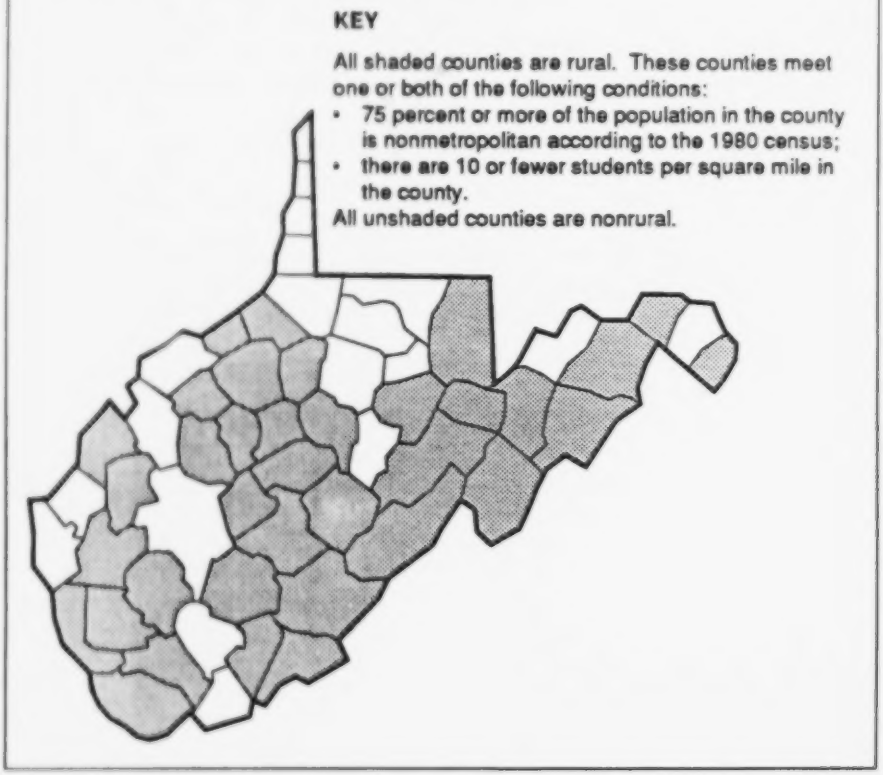
The chief state school officer is:

Dr. Henry Marockie
State Superintendent of Schools
Department of Education
Capitol Complex, Building B-358
Charleston, West Virginia 25305
304/348-2681

What is the definition of rural education?

There are many different definitions of "rural." The U. S. census defines rural as all "nonmetropolitan" areas. The census defines a metropolitan area as "a single county area or a group of contiguous counties that includes at least one 'central city' of 50,000 inhabitants or in some instances contiguous twin cities that together meet this population minimum" (Department of Commerce, 1983, p. XVIII). Some define rurality by other measures of population density and some by other demographic characteristics. Because the state of West Virginia does not define "rural education," we are using the following definition for consistency in reporting: **A rural school district is one in which 75 percent or more**

Rural Counties in West Virginia


KEY
All shaded counties are rural. These counties meet one or both of the following conditions:
• 75 percent or more of the population in the county is nonmetropolitan according to the 1980 census;
• there are 10 or fewer students per square mile in the county.
All unshaded counties are nonrural.

of the population is characterized as rural by the 1980 census or one in which student density is equal to or less than 10 pupils per square mile. This definition combines census criteria with other population density criteria. According to this definition, 36 of West Virginia's 55 counties are rural.

I. STATE POLICIES FOR RURAL EDUCATION

The state of West Virginia is a predominantly rural state. Even its metropolitan counties contain rural areas. Only recently have decisionmakers begun to recognize that the most isolated rural school districts have needs distinctly different from those of the less rural counties.

What legislative policies are there?

The West Virginia school legislation does not specify policies for rural education different from those for urban or suburban education. There are a few examples in state school laws, however, that imply consideration for the rural nature of most West Virginia school districts.

For instance, there is a provision that county comprehensive educational plans may include "a plan to give essential aid for instruction or supporting services for enrichment of curriculum in schools designated as isolated by the West Virginia Board of Education where consolidation of schools or the development of county comprehensive educational programs is not possible or feasible" (McNeel, 1987, p. 14). Other examples are provisions for high school students to be transferred (involuntarily, if necessary) to high schools in adjoining counties if "practicable transportation" to the schools in their own counties is impossible (McNeel, 1987, p. 4) and provision for county boards of education to provide kindergarten classes through nontraditional means: educational television, provision of aides for home visits, or mobile classrooms (McNeel, 1987, p. 57). None of these provisions have been funded by the legislature, although many districts allow students voluntarily to transfer to schools in other counties, with parents providing transportation.

Some provisions of the school laws work to the disadvantage of rural school districts, especially the requirement that school districts provide transportation for all pupils who live two miles or more from the school. Court decisions have ruled that, where roads are inadequate to allow for bus transportation, the school district must maintain the roads in order to provide bus transportation. School districts are even required to provide footbridges over streams for isolated students, and one superintendent reports that in one year his district had to provide five footbridges for the benefit of three students. Since the funding formula for transportation makes no provision for such extraordinary costs, transportation is a great burden to rural West Virginia school districts.

What administrative policies are there?

The State Department of Education does not assign any of its staff to rural education **per se**. In a state with very few metropolitan areas, most of the state's school districts are rural.

In 1988 the state superintendent of schools appointed a special task force "charged with the responsibility of determining the unique and special needs of rural school districts in West Virginia and to propose solutions to the West Virginia State Superintendent, West Virginia Board of Education, West Virginia Legislature and the Governor of West Virginia" (*Schools in Crisis*, 1989, p. 1). A major reason for establishing the task force was to address the concerns of rural school administrators who felt that the Education Reform Act of 1988 had unfairly deprived the most rural districts of their fair share of state funds. Defining a rural district as one with ten or fewer students per square mile (net enrollment, including adults), the task force found that 25 of the 55 counties in the state met the definition. This definition is more stringent than that used by AEL above. The task force report showed that these 25 most sparsely populated school districts were disadvantaged in a number of ways in comparison to the other 30 school districts.

The task force report, *Schools in Crisis*,

has received serious consideration from all those to whom it was addressed. Several of its recommendations have been acted upon. A provision allowing for waivers to the 34/1000 service personnel ratio was adopted by the state board of education but not yet funded by the legislature. This provision recognizes that rural school districts often require more personnel per pupil than urban districts in order to provide the same services. Funding will be requested again next year. While transportation costs have not been removed from the definition of "basic resources per pupil" in the state funding formula (greatly exaggerating resources per pupil in rural counties where transportation costs are high), a floor is now in place guaranteeing districts a minimum amount of assistance for transportation. A loss reduction clause for counties incurring drastic losses in state aid under the 1988 Education Reform Act has not been funded, but the legislature has provided approximately $370,000 for rural loss assistance. Even with this assistance, rural counties were not able to compensate for losses incurred because of changes in the funding formula for special education. One county superintendent reports that his district received $88,000 from the fund for rural loss assistance but lost about $750,000 in revenues.

II. ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH RURAL SCHOOLS OPERATE

As the map on page 4 shows graphically, 65 percent of the 55 school districts in West Virginia are rural, by AEL's definition. The environment for education in the state is heavily influenced by the fact that the majority of students attend rural schools.

How is the West Virginia state educational system organized?

The state constitution makes education a priority second only to retirement of the state's legitimate debts. It states: "The legislature shall provide, by general law, for a thorough and efficient system of free schools" (McNeel, 1987, p. 433).

Since 1982 the state has been making an effort to promote "a thorough and efficient system of free schools" as mandated by *Pauley vs Bailey*, a pioneering case and a catalyst for reform in the state. This case is informally known as the "Recht decision" for the judge who issued the ruling. The decision, in addition to prescribing the "essential ingredients" of a thorough and efficient state school system, also prescribed the precise subjects to be taught, the number of minutes of instruction, curriculum goals, and, in some cases, classroom methods.

While the legislature has never funded all of the prescribed reforms, there have been substantive changes in the following areas, according to *State Ed* (the newsletter of the State Department of Education) and annual reports of the West Virginia Department of Education: evaluation and assessment, training of teachers and administrators, awards for excellence, upgrading the curriculum, increased graduation requirements, funding of education (including an attempt to equalize salaries across counties), county accreditation and on-site monitoring, school-by-school accreditation, reporting of educational statistics, installation of technology (a Microcomputer Educational Network, a computerized communications administrative network, a distance learning program, and computerized recordkeeping for the school lunch program), improvements in buildings, community involvement (school-business partnerships, building advisory councils, parent resource centers in special education), policy input, and sanctions for non-achievement (requiring a 2.0 grade point average for participation in extra-curricular activities and revocation of dropouts' drivers licenses).

School attendance is mandated from the seventh birthday to the sixteenth birthday; students who are five years old by September 1 are admitted to kindergarten and six year olds are admitted to first grade. The school term for public school pupils is required to be at least 180 instructional days. Public schools provide instruction in kindergarten through grade twelve. By state law, all school districts in West Virginia are county districts. There are eight legislatively mandated multi-county Regional Education Service Agencies (RESAs)

which provide technical assistance to the counties in their regions.

In accordance with the constitution, the educational system is governed by a state board of education. State board members are appointed by the governor for nine-year terms. Once appointed, they may not be dismissed by any elected official, including the governor, except for proven malfeasance. Thus, they are protected from political sanctions. The state board of education supervises the State Department of Education, which implements the decisions of the board and of the legislature. On September 9, 1989, the West Virginia electorate resoundingly defeated a proposed constitutional amendment that would have made the state board of education subject to the same legislative and administrative checks and balances as other statewide departments.

State school policies mandate instructional time and instructional strategies in great detail. The legislature plays a very active role in setting state school policy, enacting into law policies that in most states would be promulgated by the State Department of Education, with the approval of the legislature. School laws are changed substantially from time to time, in an effort to maintain legislative control over state educational policies.

In 1989, for instance, the following major changes in school law occurred. The legislature amended a Temporary Early Retirement Incentives Program enacted the previous year; established a new body, the West Virginia Joint Commission for Vocational-Technical-Occupational Education; reorganized an existing body, the School Building Authority; provided for raises for educators; required school districts to provide graduates with certificates of proficiency in addition to diplomas, no later than 1991; greatly expanded the authority of the multi-county RESAs to provide services at the regional level; provided for a new statewide Curriculum Technology Resource Center which will provide centralized services to the RESAs; revised the West Virginia Statewide Testing of Educational Progress; required honors and advanced placement programs; required standardized computer hardware and software in all classrooms, beginning at the earliest grade levels; revised the formula for maximum pupil-teacher ratios; provided for new options in early childhood programs; redefined the formula for state support of public schools; altered provisions for special education; clarified the authority of school nurses; and revised the provisions for principals and assistant principals.

Since fall 1988 West Virginia has required that its "approved" teacher training programs meet all of the teacher certification standards of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. Institutions of higher education have until the fall of 1993 to come into compliance. The state superintendent of education has the authority to grant certificates or permits to persons who do not qualify for professional certificates, "a power which was designed to meet the exigencies of a teacher shortage" (McNeel, 1987, p. 202).

In January 1989, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching issued a report on higher education in West Virginia: *Building For a New Century*. One of the first points the report makes is: "The quality of higher education can rise no higher than the quality of the public schools" (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1989, p. 1). The Foundation recommended that the state's higher education system, especially teacher training institutions, initiate strong school-college collaboration to help overcome the problems of public education in West Virginia.

The average teacher salary in West Virginia is $21,904; only Arkansas and South Dakota have lower average salaries (*Charleston Gazette*, 7/22/89, p. 54). In 1987 the president of the West Virginia Education Association presented a new business item (effective for one year) to the National Education Association Representative Assembly cautioning current and prospective school employees against seeking employment in West Virginia until the current funding problems were solved. As the state Task Force report documents, "Recruitment and retention of teachers is a problem for sparsely populated counties" (*Schools in Crisis*, p. 16).

Private and church-related schools have two options: to conform to the same rules and regulations as the public schools or to

have their performance monitored according to the performance of pupils on standardized tests. Home schooling is also permissible, and permits for home schooling are to be denied only for good reasons. However, pupils receiving home schooling must perform above the fortieth percentile on standardized tests or the permit will be revoked. In any case, the state must be shown that the teacher(s) are qualified to teach their subjects (McNeel, 1987, pp. 96-97).

III. CHARACTERISTICS OF RURAL STUDENTS

There are several sources of evidence that the demographic characteristics and school performance of rural students differ from those of urban students in West Virginia.

What are the Task Force findings?

According to *Schools in Crisis*, a child in a sparsely populated county:

... will begin the day with a fairly long bus ride.

The average number of students per square mile in the 25 sparsely populated counties is 5.15, while the other 30 counties average 22.68.

Of the 25 sparsely populated counties, 15 have a single county high school; in the other 30 counties, only 5 have a single county high school.

... is more likely to have parents who are unemployed.

The average unemployment rate in the sparsely populated counties is 9.02% compared to the average of 7.0% in the other 30 counties.

Of the 9 counties in the state which have an unemployment rate over 10%, 7 are sparsely populated counties.

... is more likely to receive special education services.

The 25 sparsely populated counties have only 20% of the total students, but have 23% of the total special education population.

... is less likely to be classified as gifted.

The 25 sparsely populated counties have 20% of the student population, but only 17.06% of the gifted students.

... is more likely to have parents who did not graduate from high school.

In the 25 sparsely populated counties 35.55% of the adults did not graduate from high school, compared to the state average of 29.28%.

... has a greater chance of becoming a high school dropout.

Seventeen of the 25 sparsely populated counties have a dropout rate higher than the state average (*Schools in Crisis*, 1989, p. iii).

How do rural students score on achievement tests?

In general, as Table 1 shows, rural pupils in West Virginia do not score as well on the state mandated achievement test (Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills) as do urban and suburban students. The correlation matrix in Table 1 indicates the relationship between achievement and each of the following demographic variables: attending

TABLE 1

Correlations of Achievement and Demographic Variables

Correlations:	**Basic Skills** (% achieving at or above 40th percentile)	**Basic Skills** (in percentile ranks)
Total enrollment	.22	.23
Student density	.42*	.48*
% nonmetro population	-.52*	-.56*
Income per pupil	.64*	.68*

1-tailed Significance: * = .001

(Note: Data based on scores on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills in the ninth grade.)

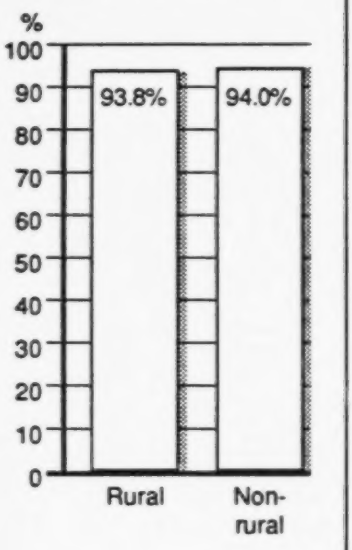


FIGURE 1

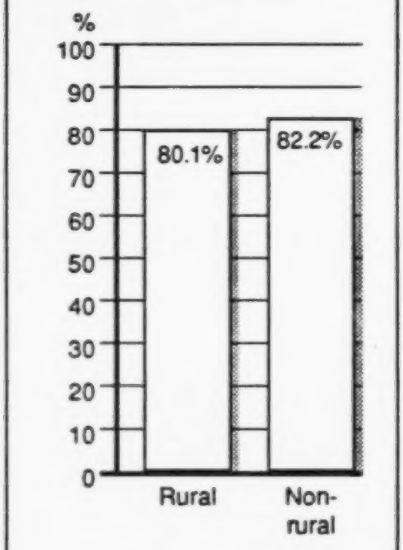
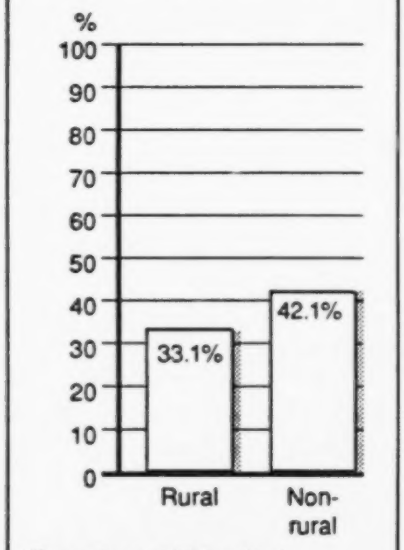


FIGURE 2



*Percentage of high school graduating seniors in 1986 with plans for postsecondary education

FIGURE 3

a rural school district, density of student population, size of the school district, and income per student.

What is the attendance rate of rural students?

The attendance rate of rural students is about the same as that of urban students. (See Figure 1)

What is the high school completion rate?

Rural students in West Virginia complete high school at about the same rate as nonrural students. However, it should be noted that high school completion rate is computed differently in different states and seldom is a good indicator of the dropout rate. In West Virginia the rate is the inverse of the dropout rate, which is based on the percentage of students who leave school before graduation during the year, for any reason except transfer to another school or death. (All school leavers at all grade levels—usually grades 7-12—are taken as a percentage of the graduating seniors plus all school leavers.) This method of calculation tends to underestimate the percentage of students in any graduating class who have dropped out of school. (See Figure 2.)

What percentage of rural students continue education beyond high school?

Fewer rural than urban students in West Virginia plan to attend postsecondary institutions (colleges or vocational schools), as shown in Figure 3.

IV. CHARACTERISTICS OF RURAL SCHOOLS

Rural school districts in West Virginia differ from urban school districts both in average numbers of schools and students and in the adequacy of their funding.

How do rural school districts differ from urban school districts?

As might be expected, rural school districts have more rural schools than do urban school districts. However, there are small, isolated, rural schools even in large, predominantly urban counties.

Rural schools generally have smaller enrollments, and there are usually fewer schools in rural districts than in urban districts. The average enrollment in rural West Virginia school districts is 4,366 pupils. In urban districts the average enrollment is 10,830. The average number of schools in rural districts is 14; in urban districts, 30.

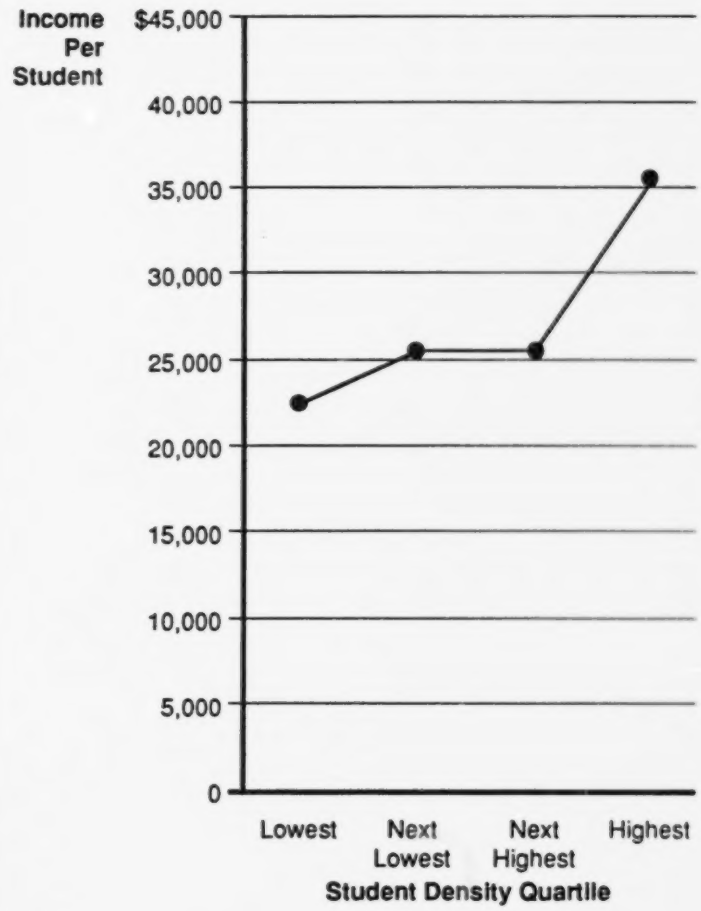
How well are rural school districts funded?

As reported in *State Ed* (1988), West Virginia spent 25.5% of the total state budget on public education in 1988. Of the total funds spent on public schools, 27% came from the local county, 65% from the state, and 8% from the federal government. The per pupil expenditure for public education in 1987 was $3,784. The national average was $3,977; West Virginia ranked 27th among the states.

According to the report of the Blue Ribbon Committee on School Finance (1988), most of the state aid for current operation of schools is allocated to the county school districts in an inverse relationship to the counties' fiscal capabilities to support their public schools. The West Virginia Basic Foundation Program is intended to equalize the fiscal resources per pupil among the counties, although it does not allow for extraordinary costs in very sparsely populated districts. The legislature has attempted to comply with the 1982 "Recht decision," which ruled the state's system of public school financing unconstitutional because of disparities in educational opportunity and in quality of school facilities.

In addition, a statewide property reappraisal effort was undertaken, along with the Uniform School Funding Amend-

Average Income per Student Enrolled by Quartile of Student Density



KEY:

Income per Student = total amount of personal income in the district divided by the number of students in the district
Lowest Student Density Quartile = school districts with fewer than 6 students per square mile
Next Lowest Student Density Quartile = school districts with at least 6 but less than 11.7 students per square mile
Next Highest Student Density Quartile = school districts with at least 11.7 but less than 24 students per square mile
Highest Student Density Quartile = school districts with 24 or more students per square mile

FIGURE 4

ment. However, the property reappraisal has not gone into effect, nor have the voters approved the Uniform School Funding Amendment. Thus, the inequities ruled unconstitutional by the "Recht decision" are still in place. Efforts to increase funding have not been successful, and educational reform is accomplished as a result of redistributing limited resources. The state's lack of financial resources account in large part for this inability to fund the "Recht decision." In 1986 West Virginia ranked fifth in the nation in tax effort (public school revenue per $1,000 of personal income) (National Education Association, 1988, p. 41).

TABLE 2
Correlations Among Demographic Variables

Correlations:	Nonmetro Population	Income Per Pupil	Poverty Rate	Student Density
% Nonmetro Population	—			
Income Per Pupil	-.83*	—		
Poverty Rate	.58*	-.72*	—	
Student Density	-.82*	.82*	-.50*	—

1-tailed Significance: * = .001

School districts may vote excess levies in order to provide a standard of education above the state-required minimum. However, very few rural districts have voted to impose such levies. In addition to documenting the unequal financial burden on rural school districts caused by high transportation and other costs, the Task Force (*Schools in Crisis*, p. 18-20) showed that property taxes are considerably higher in the low-income, poorer rural counties than in urban counties with excess levies:

> A serious problem for many sparsely populated counties is that assessors have used high assessment ratios in Class II (owner-occupied homes and farms) to offset the lack of commercial property in the counties. This has been necessary to raise the basic operating revenues for many local governments and school systems....
>
> As an extreme example, the owner of a $50,000 residence in Webster County paid $137.70 in Regular Levy taxes, but the owner of a $50,000 home in Logan County only paid $29.97 in Regular Levy taxes for schools. Of the 23 counties whose Class II assessed-to-market value ratio exceeds the state average, 13 are in the sparsely populated group. This situation, combined with the fact that taxpayers in sparsely populated counties have below average income levels, makes it extremely difficult to pass an excess levy....
>
> **Currently, all 12 counties that have no excess levy are among the 25 sparsely populated counties.** In addition, excess levies will expire on June 30, 1989, in Gilmer, Mingo, Monroe, and Pocahontas counties. Recently both Gilmer and Monroe counties tried unsuccessfully to renew their excess levies. The counties without excess levies are the same counties that have been unable to pass levies year after year. The counties that are unable to pass excess levies are generally rural and sparsely populated, with little industry (*Schools in Crisis*, pp. 19-20).

To illustrate the degree to which sparsity of population is associated with low county incomes, Figure 4 (page 10) charts the income per student according to student density quartiles.

Table 2 shows the high negative correlation between nonmetropolitan school districts and amount of personal income per student* in West Virginia, as well as the high positive correlation between income

*"Personal income per student" is the total personal income in the district divided by the number of students enrolled. It can be construed as a measure of environmental support for students.

and population density. In addition, there is a high positive correlation between nonmetropolitan school districts and the percentage of students in poverty. The more urban the school district, the greater the amount of available income. The more sparsely populated the district, the smaller the amount of available income and the more students from low-income families. All of these correlations are significant at the .001 level of significance.

There has been a great deal of school consolidation in West Virginia's countywide districts. Yet the average size of urban schools still exceeds the average size of rural schools. Fifty-three percent of West Virginia's rural school districts in 1986 were also small districts according to AEL's working definition: county districts with fewer than 3,000 students. All of West Virginia's nonrural school districts were large, according to AEL's definition.

V. Service Delivery Systems for School Improvement

West Virginia's school districts are able to draw upon a number of different sources for assistance in school improvement. As in most states, the State Department of Education and its regional service agencies provide most assistance. More limited assistance is provided by the state's colleges and universities and by agencies such as AEL.

What is the role of the RESAs?

West Virginia has a system of eight RESAs that serve as the main channel for technical assistance from the State Department of Education to county school districts.

In the coming year the authority of the RESAs to provide direct services on a regional basis is likely to be greatly expanded. Legislation enacted in 1989 provided that:

> Each regional education service agency shall conduct a study setting forth how the following services and functions may be performed by the agency for public schools and school districts within the region without terminating the employment of personnel employed by school districts prior to the effective date of this subsection: Accounting, purchasing, food service, transportation, delivery of high cost services to low incidence student populations, audio-visual material distribution, facilities planning, federal program coordination, personnel recruiting and an integrated regional computer information system (*Informal Guidelines*, 1989, pp. 144-145). Each RESA is to submit its study to the state board of education, the legislature and to the Secretary of Education and the Arts in January, 1990. It is possible that some of the functions listed in the legislation could be performed by the RESAs in the future.

What is the role of the State Department of Education?

The State Department of Education issues detailed regulations concerning the amount of time to be spent on each school subject at each grade level; mandating school nurse, library, driver education, counseling, and dropout prevention programs (for example); setting pupil-teacher ratios at each grade level; ensuring that pupils whose parents cannot afford to rent or buy textbooks will be provided with free textbooks; requiring school lunch and school breakfast programs in all schools, etc. Each school district must have an on-site review of its program every four years, and the state board of education has the authority to issue four types of recognition to a school district: full approval, substantial approval, probationary, and nonapproval.

The state department establishes committees to study school improvement issues prior to establishing statewide educational policies. For instance, in recent years there has been a committee to study distance education systems. In 1988 the legislature established a competitive grant program to fund exemplary and innovative programs to improve instruction (*Informal Guidelines*, 1989, p. 121). In 1989 it provided

for a statewide curriculum technology resource center, required honors and advanced placement programs, and required computer hardware and software programs to be provided at the earliest grade levels—starting with the first five grades immediately (*Informal Guidelines*, 1989, pp. 122-126).

Summary

This profile of rural education in West Virginia reviews state policies for rural education at a specific point in time, covering the environment in which rural schools operate, characteristics of rural students and of rural schools, and service delivery systems for school improvement. It provides a snapshot of the condition of rural education in West Virginia in the time frame of 1986-1989. The intention is to compile sufficient meaningful, current information to be of use to state decisionmakers, including legislators, administrators, school staff people, and the general citizenry.

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Note: In addition to information from the sources cited above, this profile contains information based on personal communications, primarily with those persons cited in the **Acknowledgements** section on page 2.